

75 From the ^{4475a. 119} ~~4475a. 277.~~

*On the Difference between the Deaths of the Righteous
and the Wicked,* ^{280.}

*Illustrated in the Instance of Dr. SAMUEL JOHNSON,
and DAVID HUME, Esq.*

A

SERMON,

PREACHED BEFORE THE

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,

AT

ST. MARY'S CHURCH,

ON SUNDAY, JULY 23, 1786.

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A SERMON.

JOB xxi.

Ver. 23. *One dieth in his full strength, being wholly at his ease and quiet;*

24. *His breasts are full of milk, and his bones are moistened with marrow:*

25. *And another dieth in the bitterness of his soul, and never eateth with pleasure.*

26. *They shall lie down alike in the dust, and the worms shall cover them.*

IN a few fleeting years the scenes of this mortal life must close, and the hand of death will be upon us. We all must eat that bitter fruit of sin, and encounter that last enemy, who will assault us on this side the eternal world. Now as nature shrinks at the prospect of pain, and desires an exemption from doubt and darkness; so highly reasonable is it to wish, that the conflict may not be long, nor the pangs severe, when our *strength faileth us*, and we are entering the gate of death. Such surely is the ardent desire of man; a desire which results from the constitution of his frame, of which the most active principle is self-preservation. But Divine Wisdom will teach him a higher lesson, and enable him to say, from the un-

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shaken sincerity of a filial confidence, “ Though
“ his excellency make me afraid, and his dread
“ fall upon me, though he slay me, yet will I
“ trust in him.”

It must be obvious to every reflecting mind, that Religion does not always triumph over the fears of death ; and, likewise, that the man who is depraved in principle, or profligate in practice, may enjoy an apparent peace, or display a real indifference, at the close of life.

Let us then consider the DIFFERENCE *between the deaths of him who feareth God, and of him who feareth him not** ; and, more fully to investigate the subject, let us examine the CAUSES whence the difference proceeds, the EXAMPLES by which it is illustrated, and some of the various REASONS for the divine permission of it. The result of the above considerations will afford the infidel no grounds for triumph, and the sceptic no confirmation of his doubts. Let us then duly estimate the just conclusion which may be drawn from the manner of our dissolution ; and not, through a sincere but erroneous zeal, force the argument too far ; for I cannot but apprehend that the common assertion on this subject (that the righteous has joyful hope in his death, and peace at the close of his life) has been weakened because overstrained. It has been exposed to contradiction, because it has been advanced without limitation ; but, by taking the reverse of the subject, we may more accurately ascertain the truth of the fact in particular cases, be better able to vindicate and illustrate the ways of Providence, and expose

* For instance, Dr. Johnson and David Hume.

the slight pretences on which scepticism and irreligion affect to triumph.

I shall state the objection of our adversaries in its fullest force, and combat it on the fairest grounds: "You appeal," say they, "to the testimony of the dying, and recommend the truths of the gospel as the only effectual support in the hour of death; it is thus you work on the timorous, and impose on the vulgar: but, as the appeal is made to facts, have we not seen the philosophical deist and avowed sceptic depart this life in calm tranquillity and manly fortitude, cheerfully bidding his friends adieu, and smiling in the face of death? 'he died in his full strength, being wholly at ease and quiet:' while, on the other hand, a Christian philosopher has had his mind oppressed with fears, agitated with doubts, and alarmed with terrors: 'he died in the bitterness of his soul, and while he remembered death could never eat with pleasure'."

To return a satisfactory answer to this objection. Let it be considered, that the infidel either professes his total ignorance on the subject of futurity; or, if his fears be alarmed, or his opinions shaken, he has recourse to the subterfuge of doubts. Irregular passions will make it the interest of reason to question or to deny the reality of another world; and nothing is more easy than to continue ignorant, where we are unwilling to learn; but that conduct which results from voluntary ignorance may be condemned as blind rashness, or despised as perverse infatuation, but never can be valued as true courage. He who has rushed forward in the dark may stand on the brink of a precipice

without feeling emotions of terror, and without meriting any tribute of applause. Considering the common depravity of our nature, and the awful scene of probation closed, our adversaries ought to allow that the Christian trembling, and the deist laughing, at the awful separation of soul and body, may be illustrated by the case of two criminals who are going to make satisfaction to the laws which they have violated: the one, from an habitual course of guilt, has attained that total want of reflection which induces him to deride the decision of justice, and to undergo his sentence with that stupid indifference, which superficial observers may mistake for fortitude; while the other, a novice in the practice of sin, is overwhelmed with ingenuous shame, views his violations of the law in the most glaring light, and approaches with undissembled dread to the presence of his God and his judge. The first of these characters may be applauded by those who are equally hardened in guilt, or equally blinded by infidelity; but we cannot be such strangers to the nature of man, as, from the language of confident boasting, to argue for the rectitude of his judgment, or the integrity of his cause.

Rational fear must always be proportionate to the greatness of the object which excites it, and to the interest we ourselves feel in that object. We smile at the child who trembles because it is in the dark; but we are impressed with feelings of a more serious nature, when we see any one wantonly trifling with death: for surely no wise man can esteem it a small matter to feel the last pangs of expiring humanity, to stand on the confines of the world of

spirits, and to meet the king of terrors face to face. The ostentatious bravery then so unseasonably displayed may justly be imputed to the delusions of vanity, or the obstinacy of pride. Men have the character of philosophers to support, and are anxious to affix the dignifying stamp of their death to the avowed principles of their lives. Here indeed it is very difficult to discriminate the exact features of truth; for the end of the infidel is sometimes concealed with industrious secrecy, and sometimes misrepresented by officious friendship*.

But allowing those who maintain the excellency of such examples all that they contend for, what will they gain by our concession? The history of past ages informs us, that the patrons of idolatry and superstition, of enthusiasm and heresy, of rebellion, ambition, and assassination, have encountered death with undaunted spirits, and triumphed in the agonies of expiring nature, as if supported by conscious rectitude, and animated with a hope full of immortality. Many have died martyrs to those causes which are repugnant to reason, and disgraceful to humanity; whence it must be plainly inferred, that the mere act of martyrdom cannot prove either the sincerity of faith, or the purity of morals.

Another important consideration presents itself to our view, and claims our attention, in the union between the body and the soul; the immortal spirit dwelling in an habitation of clay. The effects naturally resulting from the one are falsely ascribed to the other; which must

* Particularly the case with Voltaire.

render our reasoning confused, and our conclusions erroneous. Thus the robust constitution, the uninterrupted health, and the regular spirits of one man produce those tranquil appearances which are ascribed to a superior philosophy rising above the superstitions of the vulgar. On the other hand, a constitution enfeebled by frequent diseases, tainted by morbid melancholy, and bowed down by the pressure of age, causes those sad effects which are unjustly and invincibly attributed to the fears of superstition, the disappointments of religious hope, or the weakness of dying faith. Supposing then that the enemy of the gospel, the champion of infidelity, descended to his grave in peace, felt no remorse of conscience on the review of life, and expressed no apprehensions on the verge of the eternal world, what will this prove? Not that the religion which he so strenuously opposed was false, but that the placid appearances resulted from the strength of his constitution, or the nature of his disease. On the same principle, the sincere Christian may have his fear multiplied, his anxiety sharpened, and his conscience harrassed with distressing doubts; yet, exclusive of the ravages of sickness, and the gradations of decay, it never can be said that the humble penitent "feared where no fear was."

"The heart knoweth its own bitterness;" particularly the heart which is awakened to a sense of its danger, and is exercised with many temptations: while others are walking on in a thick mist, and therefore see no surrounding dangers; or are swimming with the rapid stream, and therefore feel no opposition: but it is not

so with him. Temptation, like affliction, for the present, is not joyous, but grievous; nevertheless, it produces the peaceable fruits of righteousness to them who are exercised thereby: for temptation separates between good and evil; the corn and the chaff; wickedness is discovered and rejected; and virtue is cultivated and perfected. The pious mind may be in heaviness through manifold temptation; yet even then it is in a blessed estate, and has cause for great joy, that the trial of his faith may be found unto praise, and honour, and glory, at the appearing " of Jesus Christ. If we follow Him " in the regeneration, if we suffer with Him, " we shall also reign with Him. They that sow " in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth " and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall " doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing " his sheaves with him."

It cannot excite any surprize that they should be ignorant of these spiritual temptations, these purifying trials, " who live after the flesh, and " are dead in trespasses and sins;" or that they should profanely ridicule what they understand not, " who love darkness rather than light, and " who come not to the light, lest their deeds " should be reproved."

By sufferings, and those in the mind as well as in the body, we are conformed to the image and the example of the great Captain of our salvation, who was made perfect by sufferings, and teaches us the same sublime lesson; to be exalted by submission, and to conquer by resignation.

May we not conceive, that, in the infinite diversity of the human mind, the reality of faith

may dwell in the heart, and yet no clear knowledge of the royal law of liberty, no assurance of future bliss, be given? In this painful state men impose burdens on themselves too heavy to be borne: the mind is distracted, and the peace lost, amidst needless scruples: scruples which are highly to be respected, because they are sincere; and tenderly to be opposed, because they are the source of real distress. The imperfection of all present attainments, and the boundless desire of excellence, induce men to review the scenes which are past, or to anticipate the endless ages of futurity *; but either of these views may distress such a mind with useless lamentations over years that are past and unimproved, and with timorous scruples concerning the scenes which are in view. Such a conduct does not altogether accord with the noble simplicity, and the filial confidence, of the gospel; yet every form of sincerity must be pleasing to Him "Who searcheth the heart;" and the weakness of sincerity can easily find his tenderest pardon, "Who knows whereof we "are made, Who remembers that we are but "dust."

The greatness and importance of the objects placed before the Christian's view, suppress

* " Dr. Johnson had the highest notions of the hard task of Christianity; whose daily terror, lest he had not done enough, originated in piety, but ended in little less than disease. Reasonable with regard to others, he had formed vain hopes of performing impossibilities himself; and finding his good works ever below his desires and intent, filled his imagination with fear that he should never obtain forgiveness for omissions of duty and criminal waste of time. These ideas kept him in constant anxiety about his salvation."

presumption, although they may not exceed belief. The deist may presume on he knows not what; but the nearer approach to the divine nature, the awful means of reconciliation, and the opening prospect of eternal glory, are calculated to inspire the believer with sacred reverence and holy peace, rather than with rapturous joy or bold confidence.

From the above remarks we may justly conclude, that the confidence or the tranquillity of the infidel are no arguments in his favour; or that the humility, fears, or sorrows of the dying Christian can form no argument against his religion, but may easily consist with the favour of his heavenly Father, and an abundant entrance into the everlasting kingdom.

§. 2. For the EXAMPLES of the best of men will justify his conduct, and prove how well it may accord with the sincerity of his faith, and the power of his religion. The holy *David*, although he sometimes rejoiced in hope, and his faith seemed like the strong mountains, which cannot be removed; yet, at other times, he walked in the darkness of the shadow of death; he complained, “ My heart is sore pained within “ me, and the terrors of death are fallen upon “ me; fearfulness and trembling are come upon “ me, and a horrible dread hath overwhelmed “ me: for my soul is full of trouble, and my “ life draweth nigh unto the grave. I am in “ misery, and like unto him who is at the point “ to die; even from my youth up thy terrors “ have I suffered with a troubled mind.”—*Hezekiah* did the thing which pleased the Lord, and was strong in the ways of *David* his father; yet this good king trembled at the approach of

death, and complained in the bitterness of his soul: "I said, in the cutting off of my days, I shall go to the gates of the grave: I am deprived of the residue of my years. I reckoned till morning, that as a lion so he will break all my bones: from day even to night wilt thou make an end of me. Mine eyes fail with looking upward: O Lord, I am oppressed: undertake for me." Might I mention, to the same purpose, the example of the blessed Saviour: I suggest this observation with the same reverence with which I would contemplate every part of his mysterious character, every action of his adorable life; it is not, perhaps, for us exactly to discriminate where the humanity suffered, or where the divinity supported the sufferer; but, as far as he suffered as a man, as far as he was *made in all things like unto his brethren*, sin only excepted, so far may his most excellent example be adduced to our present argument. As such, then, we see him enduring strong agonies on the approach of death, and praying that, if it were possible, he might decline that awful conflict*.

Other instances might be adduced to illustrate this subject; yet these may suffice, and will naturally lead us to consider,

§. 3. The Reasons for the Divine permission of this partial difference. The principle of this may be collected from (1) the order of Providence, and (2) the nature of the Gospel.

1. Although in the grand outlines of the plans

* To this purpose there is a peculiar and admirable petition in one of the old liturgies of the *Unitas Fratrum*. "O LORD, by thy shuddering at death forgive the presumption of some of thy followers."

of Providence we may discover the general characteristics of mercy and wisdom, yet in every instance we may not find that these agree with our conceptions, or can solve our doubts. God acts on a larger scale than the sublimest intellect can conceive. There is a boldness of design, and a greatness of character, which we can scarce follow or comprehend; whilst we endeavour to trace His footsteps, we are perplexed at the apparent intricacies of His ways, and are astonished at their sublimity. We feel that we are in a state of probation; we are surrounded with partial darkness.

We know but in part; indeed we see enough to confess the all-wise Governor of the moral world, and to direct our attention to another state of existence, where all the seeming inequalities of Providence will be adjusted, and all our ignorance on this important subject be done away. If then the state of probation last as long as our life, we have no reason to expect, from the general course of Divine Providence, that any marks of *love* or *hatred** will be exhibited in the deaths of the righteous or of the wicked.

We are not to receive the reward before the trial is over; especially when we reflect that the severest part may be reserved for the last. Then, without shaking our faith, or depressing our hopes, we may make the enquiry, and draw the conclusion, which Solomon did, “*How dieth the wise man? Even as the fool*†,” without shaking our faith, or depressing our hopes.

The faithful page of history informs us, that

* Eccles. ix. 1, 2.

† Eccles. ii. 16.

honours, wealth, empire, and pleasure, have sometimes been the distinguished lot of the most abandoned of men. Reason may then safely conclude, that these things can be no certain marks of the favour of Providence; but divine revelation advances us to a higher class in the school of heavenly truth, and exhibits the favourites of heaven distinguished and improved by affliction; for “whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son in whom he delighteth.” Where then shall we look for these; in the palaces of kings, the circles of pleasure, or the cabals of ambition? Or, rather, are they not to be found amidst sickness and sorrow, repentance and self-denial; amidst the flames of martyrs, and the racks of confessors; in the gloom of prisons, and the solitude of deserts? As the righteous then are not distinguished by marks of earthly favour in their lives, it may be but consistent with the same comprehensive system of Divine Wisdom, that they should not be more distinguished in their deaths.

2. *The design of the GOSPEL* is more immediately calculated to perfect our nature, and to elevate our mind. The general means which it uses, are to purify us by affliction, and to exercise us in patience. Christianity is a religion of sufferings. It claims them as it's distinguished portion, it endures them with the meekness of wisdom, and directs them to the noblest end. It's graces are characterized, and it's perfection attained, by afflictions. The Gospel calls for more generous exertions of patience, than the ceremonial law was capable of admitting. There was a temporality in the

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conduct of this latter. A visible theocracy distributed rewards and punishments in this life. It was accommodated to the gross senses of the Jews. In that infancy of religion, Faith and Hope were confined within a narrower compass, and principally founded on objects of sense. But the **GOSPEL**, with a greatness peculiar to itself, embraces a wider compass, invariably points to the regions of eternity, and requires a more noble faith, because it is not sensible, but intellectual. We ought, then, to enlarge our comprehensions of Divine things, and not to contract them within the narrow compass of sense or reason, which will be degraded by expecting here the exact retributions of justice.

Hence we may collect the wisdom and expedience, that the righteous may be “oppressed “with infirmities and beset with anxieties*,” even in his last moments; that thus patience may have her perfect work, faith gain a complete victory, and the power of piety be more fully displayed. He may say, with the suffering Job, “Though he slay me, yet will I “trust in Him.” There is a noble disinterestedness in this conduct, far superior to the expectation or the enjoyment of mere temporal comfort.

But while we are engaged on this subject, and are inquiring why the righteous suffer from an apprehension of death, we may see great reason to admire the divine mercy, which permits them to suffer no more; and exempts others, whose faith perhaps may be less able to endure it, from the same trial. Who that “communes

* Johnson's *Meditations and Prayers*, p. 151.

“ with his own heart, and searches out his spirit,” can claim even *this* on the covenant of promise, that he should go down to his grave in peace? Who can say, “ I have washed my hands in “ innocence, and made my heart clean: I have “ walked uprightly, worked righteousness, and “ only spoken the truth in my heart;” that surely to me “ the bitterness of death is past?” Those eminent characters, in whom were united the highest wisdom and purity, have always been more ready to acknowledge their defects, and to lament their transgressions, than to extol their virtues, or to claim their reward.

This constitution of things seems wisely designed to rest our faith on its proper foundation, that it should not stand on the actions of men, but on the veracity of God; for if joyful hope and peace were the inseparable attendants on the death-beds of the righteous, many might be influenced by the mean motives of a temporal bribe, and indulge a refined spirit of self-interest, while they thought they were promoting the glory of God.

It has been observed, on this subject, that the difference between the deaths of the righteous and the wicked may proceed from *total ignorance* on the part of the latter; or may be the effects of *ostentatious vanity*, or the composure of the *animal frame*. From the *examples* which authorize the fears of the best of men, and from the *reasons* alledged for the divine permission of such a conduct, I humbly conceive that the objection which introduced these observations is not only fully obviated, but, by a closer investigation of the subject, has led us to discover the wisdom and propriety in permitting no greater

difference between the deaths of the righteous and the wicked.

Hence we may learn, not to “call the proud “happy *,” either in the arrogance of his life, or the insensibility of his death:—not to envy the infidel or the sceptic the gloomy satisfaction of doubting, where truth only can afford comfort †; or of supposing that they shall sink through death into dark annihilation, whence we trust that we shall rise to the life immortal:—not to make the heart of the righteous sad, whom GOD hath not made sad, by falsely interpreting the pains of death, or attempting to circumscribe the procedures of Divine Mercy within the narrow limits of our comprehension.

Rather than judging of others, and drawing doubtful conclusions from their latter ends, our only business is with ourselves. It is natural to wish for peace at the last; and this wish of Reason will be improved by Religion, if we now “die unto Sin, and live unto GOD.” This divine life may exist, and yet in some cases peace

* Mal. iii. 15.

† “His morbid melancholy gathered such strength as to afflict him in a dreadful manner: he was overwhelmed with an horrible hypochondria; with perpetual irritation, fretfulness, and impatience; and with a dejection, gloom, and despair, that made existence misery.”

Anderson’s Life of Johnson, p. 24.

“The serenity, the independence, and the exultation of religion were sentiments to which he was a stranger. He saw the Almighty in a different light from what He is represented in the purer page of the Gospel; and he trembled in the presence of infinite Goodness. Those tenets of the church of England which were most nearly allied to Calvinism were congenial to his general feelings, and they made an easy impression, which habits confirmed, and which reason, if ever exerted, could not efface.”—Ib. p. 29, 30.

and joy be withheld for a season: yet peace and joy can never animate the soul on rational principles, unless the foundation be “ Faith “ working by Love,” and producing universal holiness in heart and life. Without these, a tranquility of mind is nothing more than brutal stupidity, and the expectation of eternal happiness but a strong delusion; even the hope of the hypocrite, which shall perish. Let us then “ look unto the Author and the Finisher “ of our Faith,” whose death was the purchase of our life, and whose resurrection was the pledge of our victory; who can convert the last punishment of sin into the instrument of more exalted virtue: let us live in his faith and fear, daily perfecting holiness in his sight, and preparing for the nearer approach of death: “ For who is among you that feareth the LORD, “ that walketh in darkness, and hath no light, “ let him trust in the name of the LORD, and “ stay upon his GOD.” Thus we use the appointed means to secure the marks of his approbation at the last hour, that we may then confess his truth, and rejoice in the hope which is set before us: this surely is well: but if He refuse this, if He add sorrow to sickness, it is far better that we resign ourselves to the will of the Father of Mercies: for the cup, whether in life or in death, which He giveth us to drink, shall we not drink it? “ Although my strength “ and my heart fail me, yet GOD is my portion “ for ever.”

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*The following, extracted from a POEM called ΓΝΩΘΙ
ΣΕΑΤΤΟΝ, by Dr. JOHNSON, Vol. I. p. 179,
exhibits a melancholy picture of a great mind.*

“ ME, pensi immunis cum jam mihi reddor, inertis
Desidiæ sors dura manet, graviorque labore
Tristis et atra quies, et tardæ tædia vitæ.
Nascuntur curis curæ, vexatque dolorum
Importuna cohors, vacuæ mala somnia mentis.
Nunc clamosa juvant nocturnæ gaudia mensæ,
Nunc loca sola placent ; frustra te, somne, recumbens
Alme voco, impatiens noctis metuensque diei,
Omnia percurro trepidus, circum omnia lustro,
Si qua usquam pateat melioris semita vitæ
Nec quid agam invenio, meditatus grandia, cogor
Notior ipse mihi fieri, incultumque fateri
Pectus, et ingenium vano se robore jactans.
Ingenium nisi materiem doctrina ministrat,
Cessat inops rerum, ut torpet, si marmoris absit
Copia, Phidiaci fæcunda potentia cœli
Quid agam, quounque ferar, conatibus obstat
Res angusta domi, et macræ penuria mentis

* * * * *

Non operum serie seriem dum computat ævi,
Præteritis fruitur, laetos aut sumit honores
Ipse sui judex, actæ bene munera vitæ ;
Sed sua regna videns, loca nocte silentia late
Horret, ubi vanæ species, umbræque fugaces
In rerum volitant raræ per inane figuræ.”

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